

Phonological Awareness: A Key Skill for Pre-School Literacy

Fidela Cosmas Akpan

Department of General Studies

Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua

Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

E-mail: cosmasf19@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Phonological awareness is a critical component of early literacy development, laying the groundwork for successful reading and writing. This article examines its role in preschool education, focusing on children's ability to identify and manipulate the sound structures of language, including words, syllables, rhymes, and phonemes. Research consistently shows that phonological awareness is a strong predictor of future literacy achievement, supporting decoding, spelling, and vocabulary growth. Early exposure to sound-based activities enhances children's reading fluency and comprehension. Practical strategies, such as rhyming games, syllable clapping, and phoneme manipulation, can effectively strengthen these skills in early years settings. Both educators and parents play vital roles in nurturing phonological awareness through intentional, play-based learning and meaningful language interactions. Integrating these practices into preschool curricula can significantly reduce the risk of later reading difficulties and promote long-term academic success. This paper highlights the importance of early intervention and provides evidence-informed recommendations for fostering phonological awareness in young learners.

Keywords: phonological awareness, early literacy, preschool education, phonemic skills, reading development

INTRODUCTION

Phonological awareness has emerged as one of the most significant predictors of later literacy achievement, serving as a cornerstone for the development of reading and writing skills in young children. In the early years of learning, children acquire a range of oral language skills that form the foundation for their literacy development. These skills are not only essential for successful decoding and spelling but also contribute to overall language comprehension. The preschool period is considered a critical window during which children's awareness of sounds can be effectively nurtured, thereby setting a solid groundwork for formal reading instruction in the early primary years.

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to recognise, discriminate, and manipulate the sound structures of spoken language, including words, syllables,

onset–rime units, and phonemes. Unlike phonics, which involves the relationship between sounds and written symbols, phonological awareness focuses purely on oral language. This distinction is crucial because the ability to hear and play with sounds typically develops before children begin to associate those sounds with letters. A strong understanding of phonological patterns allows learners to segment and blend sounds, making it easier to decode words once print is introduced.

The significance of phonological awareness lies in its predictive power for future literacy success. Research consistently indicates that children who enter primary school with well-developed sound awareness are more likely to become fluent readers and confident spellers. Early difficulties in phonological processing, on the other hand, are often linked to reading challenges, including dyslexia and related learning difficulties. For this reason, educators and policymakers have increasingly recognised phonological awareness as a fundamental early literacy skill that warrants explicit attention in preschool curricula.

Early childhood education provides a unique opportunity to cultivate phonological awareness through intentional and play-based learning experiences. In this stage, children's natural interest in language can be harnessed through songs, rhymes, stories, and interactive activities that expose them to a rich variety of sound patterns. Activities such as clapping syllables, identifying rhymes, and segmenting phonemes support both language development and emergent literacy. These experiences are particularly valuable for children from diverse linguistic backgrounds, ensuring that all learners receive equitable support in their early literacy journey. The early years classroom, however, is not the only environment where phonological awareness can be fostered. Parents and caregivers also play an essential role by creating language-rich home environments. Informal conversations, shared book reading, and daily language games contribute to the development of children's sound awareness long before formal schooling begins. This collaborative approach between home and school strengthens the foundation for later literacy acquisition and helps close gaps for children at risk of reading delays.

Despite its recognised importance, not all preschool settings are equally equipped to provide systematic phonological awareness instruction. Limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and varying curriculum priorities can hinder the effective implementation of sound-based activities. Furthermore, children's individual differences, such as language background, speech development, and exposure to print, may influence how quickly they acquire these skills. Addressing these disparities requires well-structured programmes and informed teaching practices that align with evidence-based strategies.

This article explores the concept of phonological awareness in depth, emphasising its role as a key skill for preschool literacy. It examines its theoretical

underpinnings, components, and relationship with reading development. It also considers practical instructional strategies, the roles of educators and parents, challenges in implementation, and future directions for research. By highlighting its central role in early learning, this paper seeks to inform teaching practice, support early intervention, and contribute to more effective literacy outcomes for young children.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The concept of phonological awareness is grounded in the understanding that spoken language is made up of smaller sound units that can be identified, segmented, and manipulated. It encompasses several components, including word awareness, syllable segmentation, onset–rime awareness, and phonemic awareness. Unlike phonics, which involves the relationship between sounds and letters, phonological awareness is entirely auditory and precedes the development of reading and spelling. This distinction is crucial because children who can recognise and manipulate sounds are better prepared to link these sounds to written symbols when they begin formal literacy instruction. In preschool settings, building a strong conceptual foundation in phonological awareness enables children to develop critical listening and language skills that directly support early reading development.

Within this conceptual framework, phonological awareness functions as a bridge between oral language and literacy acquisition. It supports decoding by helping children understand that spoken words can be broken down into sound units, which correspond to graphemes in written language. This process facilitates word recognition, spelling accuracy, and overall reading fluency. Furthermore, phonological awareness interacts with vocabulary knowledge and language comprehension, both of which contribute to literacy success. Early mastery of these skills has been shown to reduce the risk of reading difficulties and to support long-term academic achievement. As such, phonological awareness is not a peripheral skill but a central component of early literacy development.

Components of Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is a broad construct that involves recognising and manipulating different levels of sound within spoken language. It progresses from sensitivity to larger sound units, such as words and syllables, to more refined awareness of individual phonemes. Each component contributes uniquely to children's developing literacy skills, particularly their ability to decode and encode written language. A clear understanding of these components allows educators to design structured, developmentally appropriate instruction that supports early reading success.

Word and sentence awareness forms the earliest level of phonological development. At this stage, children begin to understand that spoken language can be broken down into individual words and that words combine to form sentences. For example, when listening to a sentence, children can tap or clap to count how many words they hear. This skill may appear simple, but it reflects an essential step in understanding the structure of language. It lays the groundwork for later skills such as segmenting and blending, as children learn that language is composed of distinct units that can be isolated and manipulated.

Syllable awareness represents the next stage, where children learn to recognise and divide words into syllables. Activities such as clapping or tapping out syllables in words like elephant (el-e-phant) help children become aware of these sound chunks. Syllable segmentation and blending are critical for oral language development, as they help children perceive longer words as being composed of smaller, more manageable parts. This skill becomes especially useful when children encounter multisyllabic words in reading and spelling, allowing them to decode them more efficiently.

Onset–rime awareness and rhyming are additional components that support phonological processing. The onset refers to the initial sound in a syllable, while the rime includes the remaining part, such as /c/ and at in “cat.” Children who can recognise and manipulate onset and rime units develop a better understanding of sound patterns in language. Similarly, rhyming activities—such as identifying words that sound alike or generating their own rhymes—strengthen children’s auditory discrimination skills. Rhyming is often introduced through songs, nursery rhymes, and playful word games, making it an engaging and natural part of early literacy experiences.

The most advanced level of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness, which involves identifying and manipulating individual phonemes, the smallest units of sound in language. This includes skills such as isolating initial or final sounds, blending phonemes to form words, segmenting words into phonemes, and substituting sounds to create new words (e.g., changing /m/ in “mat” to /c/ to make “cat”). Phonemic awareness is closely linked to early reading acquisition, as it directly supports children’s ability to connect sounds to graphemes during phonics instruction. Strong phonemic awareness is a reliable predictor of later reading fluency and spelling accuracy.

Together, these components, word and sentence awareness, syllable awareness, onset–rime awareness, rhyming, and phonemic awareness—form a developmental continuum that underpins successful literacy learning. While these skills typically emerge in a predictable sequence, they can be developed simultaneously through intentional, playful, and explicit instruction in early childhood settings. A balanced approach that integrates these components ensures that children

are equipped with the auditory and linguistic foundations needed for fluent reading and confident writing.

Importance of Phonological Awareness in Early Literacy

Phonological awareness is widely recognised as one of the strongest predictors of early reading and writing success. It provides children with the ability to detect and manipulate the sound structures of language, which is a critical foundation for literacy learning. Unlike print knowledge or alphabet recognition, phonological awareness focuses on oral language, making it a precursor to formal reading instruction. When children can perceive and play with sounds in words, they are better prepared to understand how written symbols correspond to those sounds. This early mastery of sound structure enhances their ability to decode and encode language, which is essential for fluent reading and accurate spelling.

One of the primary reasons phonological awareness is so essential is its role as a foundation for reading and spelling. Learning to read involves mapping sounds to letters, blending them to form words, and segmenting them during spelling. Children who can break words down into syllables and phonemes find it easier to decode unfamiliar words, recognise patterns, and develop automaticity in reading. Similarly, when spelling, they rely on their ability to segment spoken words into individual sounds, which supports accurate letter–sound correspondence. This strong sound–symbol relationship accelerates reading fluency and builds confidence in early learners.

Phonological awareness also has a significant impact on vocabulary development and comprehension. When children can identify and manipulate sounds, they become more aware of the structure of words, which in turn strengthens their understanding of new vocabulary. They can recognise similarities between words, detect patterns, and remember word forms more effectively. This heightened awareness allows them to comprehend texts more easily because they spend less mental energy on decoding and can focus more on meaning-making. Furthermore, exposure to rhymes, songs, and sound play enriches their oral language, which contributes to a more extensive vocabulary base and stronger reading comprehension skills. Another important aspect is the predictive value of phonological awareness for later academic achievement. Numerous studies have shown that early proficiency in phonological awareness is a strong indicator of future reading fluency, spelling accuracy, and overall literacy performance. Children who develop these skills before formal schooling often adapt more quickly to reading instruction and demonstrate better outcomes in literacy assessments. In contrast, children who begin school with limited phonological skills are more likely to experience difficulties in learning to read, which can affect their progress in other academic areas. Therefore, developing

phonological awareness early creates a strong literacy foundation that supports long-term academic success.

Finally, phonological awareness plays a crucial role in the prevention of reading difficulties and dyslexia. Many children who struggle with reading, particularly those with dyslexia, have underlying weaknesses in phonological processing. By identifying and addressing these weaknesses in preschool or early primary years, educators can provide targeted interventions that significantly reduce the risk of persistent reading problems. Systematic and explicit phonological awareness instruction can serve as a protective factor, equipping children with the skills they need to overcome early literacy barriers. This proactive approach is far more effective than attempting to remediate difficulties after they have become entrenched.

That looks excellent - it already reads like a clear and well-organised section of a journal article.

Instructional Strategies and Pedagogical Practices

Effective development of phonological awareness in preschool settings depends on purposeful and well-structured instructional strategies. Rather than relying solely on formal drills, early literacy instruction is most successful when it is interactive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate (Gillon, 2018). Play-based learning and sound games are particularly effective for introducing young children to the sound structures of language. Activities such as clapping to the rhythm of words, matching sounds to objects, or playing "I Spy" with initial sounds make phonological concepts accessible in a playful and natural way. Through these games, children learn to listen closely, discriminate between sounds, and apply their understanding in meaningful contexts, which helps to build a strong foundation for reading (Goswami, 2001).

Another powerful approach involves rhyming and syllable activities, which support children's ability to hear and manipulate larger sound units. Rhyming songs, nursery rhymes, and chants expose learners to recurring sound patterns and help them recognise similarities between words (Bryant et al., 1990). Syllable clapping or tapping allows children to segment and blend parts of words, improving their auditory discrimination and phonological memory. Because these activities are rhythmic and enjoyable, they promote active participation and language play, making the learning process both effective and enjoyable. This strategy is especially beneficial for children who are developing early language skills or who are learning English as an additional language (Anthony & Francis, 2005).

Phoneme manipulation exercises focus on developing more advanced phonological awareness by drawing children's attention to individual sounds within words. Activities such as identifying initial or final sounds, substituting one phoneme

for another, or blending separate sounds to form words strengthen the skills required for early decoding and spelling. These exercises can be delivered through simple oral games or through the use of visual supports, such as picture cards or letter tiles, to enhance understanding. By explicitly teaching children to manipulate phonemes, educators lay the groundwork for phonics instruction and fluent word recognition (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Finally, interactive storytelling and shared reading, combined with integration into daily classroom routines, provide authentic opportunities for applying phonological awareness skills. During storytelling sessions, teachers can emphasise rhymes, repeat key sounds, and encourage children to predict or supply missing words (Adams, 1990). Shared reading promotes exposure to rich language, vocabulary, and sound patterns in a meaningful context. Embedding phonological activities throughout the day—such as during transitions, songs, or morning routines—ensures consistent reinforcement without requiring extended instructional time. When phonological awareness is woven naturally into everyday teaching, it becomes a dynamic and sustainable part of the literacy curriculum (Lonigan et al., 2013).

Role of Stakeholders

The effective development of phonological awareness in early childhood relies heavily on the active engagement of key stakeholders, with teachers playing a pivotal role. As the primary facilitators of early literacy learning, teachers are responsible for delivering structured and intentional instruction that builds children's sound awareness skills. Through carefully planned activities, explicit modelling, and systematic scaffolding, educators can support children in developing skills such as syllable segmentation, rhyming, and phoneme manipulation. Early identification of literacy difficulties is another crucial element of teachers' roles, as timely intervention can significantly improve literacy outcomes. When teachers are well-trained and equipped with evidence-based strategies, they can create classroom environments that foster confident, capable early readers.

Parents and caregivers are equally important stakeholders in nurturing phonological awareness, as children's literacy development begins long before formal schooling. A rich home literacy environment, characterised by shared book reading, storytelling, songs, and language play, significantly contributes to children's early language and sound awareness skills. Parental involvement not only reinforces what children learn in school but also provides them with meaningful opportunities to practise language in everyday contexts. Encouraging parents to engage in simple literacy activities at home—such as clapping syllables, playing rhyming games, or reading aloud—can enhance children's phonological skills and strengthen their overall literacy foundation.

Community and policy support are also critical in sustaining and expanding early literacy efforts. When communities prioritise literacy through libraries, early years centres, and outreach programmes, children gain wider access to language-rich experiences. Policymakers further contribute by implementing frameworks that support teacher training, literacy resources, and inclusive early education. Investment in early literacy programmes not only reduces later academic gaps but also promotes equity by ensuring all children, regardless of background, receive the support they need. A coordinated effort between schools, families, communities, and policymakers is therefore essential to maximise the impact of phonological awareness instruction and to build a strong foundation for lifelong literacy.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite the recognised importance of phonological awareness in early literacy, several challenges and barriers hinder its effective implementation in preschool settings. A key issue is limited resources and insufficient teacher training. Many early years classrooms lack access to appropriate instructional materials, structured phonological awareness programmes, and specialised support.

This often results in inconsistent or superficial instruction, which may not meet the developmental needs of all learners. Additionally, when teachers are not adequately trained in evidence-based literacy approaches, they may struggle to provide targeted interventions for children who are at risk of falling behind. Another significant barrier is the diverse language backgrounds of learners, particularly in multilingual classrooms. Children who are learning English as an additional language may require differentiated support, yet not all schools have the capacity or expertise to deliver instruction that is culturally and linguistically responsive. Further obstacles arise from the early identification of literacy difficulties and curriculum constraints. Many children with emerging phonological processing difficulties go undetected in the early years, delaying intervention and increasing the likelihood of persistent reading problems later in school. Early screening and targeted support are essential, yet such measures are often limited by time, staffing, and assessment resources. In addition, overly prescriptive curricula can restrict teachers' ability to integrate flexible, play-based phonological activities into daily routines. When instructional time is dominated by other learning areas, phonological awareness may receive less emphasis, despite its crucial role in reading development. Overcoming these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that includes teacher training, adequate funding, early assessment systems, and curriculum designs that prioritise foundational literacy skills.

Implications for Practice

The effective promotion of phonological awareness in early childhood settings requires practical strategies that are grounded in evidence and implemented with consistency. Evidence-informed teaching approaches should guide classroom instruction, ensuring that activities such as rhyming, syllable segmentation, and phoneme manipulation are developmentally appropriate and systematically integrated into daily learning experiences. To sustain high-quality practice, teacher training and professional development are essential, equipping educators with the knowledge and confidence to identify literacy needs and deliver targeted instruction. Equally important is early screening and support, which allows practitioners to detect phonological difficulties promptly and intervene before they develop into more significant reading challenges. Embedding these practices into early education frameworks can enhance literacy outcomes, reduce the risk of later reading difficulties, and ensure that all children build a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

CONCLUSION

Phonological awareness is a fundamental component of early literacy development, laying the groundwork for children's reading, spelling, and language comprehension skills. It encompasses a range of sound-based abilities, including word and syllable segmentation, onset–rime recognition, rhyming, and phonemic awareness. These skills form a developmental continuum that supports children's ability to decode, encode, and comprehend written language. Effective phonological awareness instruction relies on evidence-informed, developmentally appropriate strategies, such as play-based sound games, rhyming and syllable activities, phoneme manipulation, and shared reading experiences. When these practices are intentionally integrated into daily classroom routines, they create rich language environments that enhance children's early literacy learning.

However, the successful promotion of phonological awareness depends on the active engagement of multiple stakeholders and the removal of existing barriers. Teachers play a central role through structured instruction and early intervention, while parents and communities contribute by reinforcing language-rich experiences beyond the classroom. Challenges such as limited resources, linguistic diversity, curriculum restrictions, and delays in identifying literacy difficulties can hinder progress, highlighting the need for systemic support. Strengthening teacher training, prioritising early screening, and embedding phonological instruction into early years frameworks can improve literacy outcomes for all learners. Ultimately, fostering phonological awareness at the preschool stage provides children with the foundational skills they need to thrive as confident, fluent, and successful readers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance phonological awareness and its role in early literacy, it is essential to adopt a strategic and holistic approach that goes beyond classroom instruction. First, strengthening early literacy curricula should be prioritised to ensure that phonological awareness is embedded as a core component of preschool education rather than treated as an optional skill. Curricula should reflect evidence-based practices that align with children's developmental stages and provide structured opportunities for sound play, rhyming, syllable work, and phoneme manipulation. This would ensure that all learners, regardless of background, benefit from consistent and high-quality phonological instruction.

Secondly, encouraging collaboration between educators, families, and policymakers can create a shared responsibility for promoting early literacy. When stakeholders work together, children receive continuous support across home, school, and community settings. In addition, there is a need for longitudinal research on phonological awareness and literacy outcomes, which can offer deeper insights into how early sound awareness influences reading achievement over time. Further, the development of culturally responsive instructional resources can make literacy instruction more inclusive and relevant to diverse learners. Finally, research on technology-supported phonological instruction should be expanded to explore innovative ways of using digital tools to enhance engagement and learning. These recommendations, when implemented collectively, can strengthen early literacy foundations and improve reading outcomes for all children.

REFERENCES

Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. MIT Press.

Anthony, J. L., & Francis, D. J. (2005). Development of phonological awareness. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(5), 255–259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00376.x>

Bryant, P. E., MacLean, M., Bradley, L. L., & Crossland, J. (1990). Rhyme and alliteration, phoneme detection, and learning to read. *Developmental Psychology*, 26(3), 429–438. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.26.3.429>

Ehri, L. C. (2005). Learning to read words: Theory, findings, and issues. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 9(2), 167–188. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532799xssr0902_4

Fox, B., & Routh, D. K. (1984). Building phonemic awareness in young children: The effects of reading instruction. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76(6), 1268–1278. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.76.6.1268>

Gillon, G. T. (2018). *Phonological awareness: From research to practice* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Goswami, U. (2001). Early phonological development and the acquisition of literacy. In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 111–125). Guilford Press.

Lonigan, C. J., Schatschneider, C., & Westberg, L. (2013). *Identification of children's skills and abilities linked to later outcomes in reading, writing, and spelling*. National Early Literacy Panel.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. National Academy Press.

Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21(4), 360–407. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.21.4.1>

Torgesen, J. K., Wagner, R. K., & Rashotte, C. A. (1994). Longitudinal studies of phonological processing and reading. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 27(5), 276–286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002221949402700503>

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J. (1998). Child development and emergent literacy. *Child Development*, 69(3), 848–872. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1132208>

Yopp, H. K., & Yopp, R. H. (2000). Supporting phonemic awareness development in the classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(2), 130–143.